

185hh- Samsara Is Directly Visible

By Ajahn Nyanamoli Thera

(A Summarized Transcription Of A Hillside Hermitage Dhamma Talk)

Ask yourself can you stop your feelings? Can you stop your form/*rupa* from deteriorating? Can you prevent perceptions from besetting you? Can you not choose?

Q: What is samsara?

Nm: Samsara is usually translated as rebirth but it literally means “wandering on” (to move about continuously). It’s a translation which makes the meaning clearer because rebirth implies this life, the next life, and an in-between place which is just me passing through from one life to another. However, you are not being reborn, it’s more like you ‘still are’ just here and there continuously on and on.

“Again, Udāyi, I have declared this method to my disciples. Fallen to this method my disciples could recollect the various manifold previous births. Such as one birth, two births, three, four, five, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty births, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, an innumerable forward cycle of births, and an innumerable backward cycle of births and an innumerable forward and a backward cycle of births. There I was of such name, clan, disposition, supports, experiencing these pleasant and unpleasant feelings and in such a life span. Disappearing from there was born here, with such name, clan, disposition, supports, and experiences, feeling these pleasant and unpleasant feelings in such a life span. Disappearing from there is born here. Thus they recollect the various manifold previous births. Udāyi, it is like a man who would go from his village to another village, and from there would go to another village, and would come back to his own village: and it would occur to him. I went from my village to that village, there I stood thus, sat thus, said this and kept silence thus. From that village I went to the next village, there I stood thus, sat thus, said this, and kept silence thus. From that village, I came back to my village. In the same manner, I have declared the method to my disciples fallen to which, my disciples could recollect the various manifold births such as one birth, two births----Thus recollect the various manifold previous births...” - Mn 77

You are here now and then you are somewhere else without these memories and recognitions, but similar aggregates and point of view, it's just a wandering on, like you go to sleep and wake up another day, then you go to sleep and you wake up like an animal. I'm overly simplifying it but only because sometimes reflecting on samsara can have an impact on people, in the sense it brings up a sense of urgency regarding the practice because if you speak about rebirth it sounds like it's just out of your hands, it's just how the universe works, you just come and go here and there, but the birth itself is not the beginning.

Imagine now for instance if someone were to offer you to restart this life, go back and become a toddler without being able to keep all of your memories of everything that you have been through, that all has to be erased, would you go through the same ordeal again, just in this life that you already know, let alone in a realm that you

are not familiar with? When you think about it, you realize that the appeal would only be if you can keep your memories and then you can restart the same life again, and that's really how many people think about rebirth as though they take things with them and just better themselves through rebirth, but no, it's just a memory-erasing but you are still there, as though someone were to wipe your memories and you start again without the knowledge from your previous experiences. Would you want to do it again? It would make you think twice because you might make even worse choices than you already have. In a nostalgic hindsight, your experiences of your daily pressures can seem quite pleasant but when it's there it's never pleasant.

The Buddha said, there is nothing that you haven't been already. Beings have been samsara for so long they have been everything, a mother, a father, a killer, the killed, every animal, etc. The tedious repetition that you have no memory of is basically what samsara is. You can realize that this life is already samsara, this is already that wandering on, it's one of many wanderings, and the actions you choose which will be the directions in which you will wander on later. That is why beings are the owners of their actions, the choices you make, and the things you do determine in which direction you are headed.

Q: Is samsara something which encompasses us?

Nm: You are not in Samsara, it is not a universe that you inhabit, it is your experience as a whole. What you have now is what samsara is. In the same sense that you can recognize certain tedious repetitions of day-to-day things, just extend that into infinity, extend that into the next life and the next life, and so on, perpetually just repeating because you forget. As the Buddha said, if someone can remember their previous lives, their previous wanderings, the directions that they have been in, all they will remember is these five-assumed-aggregates that they have now. Those aggregates are your experience as a whole, which is matter, feeling, perceptions, activities/determinations, and consciousness, there is nothing outside of that. Samsara is the aggregates which are bound with ignorance which keeps being repeated until you make the effort to uproot that ignorance.

“...When recollecting thus, bhikkhus: ‘I had such a form in the past,’ it is just a form that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such a feeling in the past,’ it is just a feeling that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such a perception in the past,’ it is just a perception that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such determinations in the past,’ it is just determinations that one recollects. When recollecting: ‘I had such consciousness in the past,’ it is just consciousness that one recollects..” -Sn22:79

Q: The content of one's experience changes but the general nature remains the same?

Nm: The content changes while the aggregates remain the same and that's the whole point. From that village to the next, the point is that you are still wandering on, so it's not metaphorically speaking, samsara is already here, it is what this life already is, a wandering on, I mean ask yourself, can you stop your feelings? Can you stop your form from deteriorating? Can you prevent perceptions from besetting you? Can you not choose? Can you just switch off your consciousness? You have no say in these aggregates they are just coming and going, taking

directions. That's already what samsara is. You don't need the belief or proof of next life because you are already not in control of these aggregates and they are already taking directions that often you don't even want to go in and which forces you to have to endure things. Right here is the samsara, you don't get it more direct than that. So yes, death is not the end, and birth is not the beginning, it's just like a rearrangement of the same thing, another way of repeating it. You don't need the memory of previous lives or a special insight into future lives to see samsara as wandering on which is something which you are already fully engaged with as we speak.

Q: Samsara is something you are subjected to?

Nm: Yes, you are doing it and you can't just stop it, because that would be another choice within the samsara, another choice within the aggregate of sankhara. Can you not choose? Can you abstain from not choosing without that being another choice? You can't, you are fully within it, so you have to do it. Can you not feel? Is that even conceivable? Can you imagine your existence in the most abstract terms without a form or a body or some kind of enduring thing there? Impossible, inconceivable. You are fully under the weight and control of the aggregates, you can't stop them, you can't tell your aggregates to go this way or that way, but you can start making the choices of a wholesome kind as opposed to an unwholesome kind, and in that indirect manner improve the state of your situation.

If a person starts to practice sense restraint their mind will develop more patience, more calmness, more self-composure and strength and that's already something which would make this wandering on in this life much more endurable and agreeable as well. Is being impatient pleasant or unpleasant? It's very unpleasant when you want something that you cannot get, or you don't want something but you can't get rid of it and you have to endure it, you're not patient. Is patience given or do you develop it, either by circumstances forcing it upon you whereby you have no choice or actually if you foresee it and start making effort in the direction of developing patience? That's just one example, so by making choices of a wholesome kind in this life, by not pursuing sensuality, not being careless, and disregarding others, not being immoral, and harmful to others by making that effort to keep yourself in check, you are developing patience, which means that the endurance of this samsara you will be able to tolerate it even more, the pressure as well, because you developed that tolerance. Tolerance needs to be developed, it's not a god-given quality. If you invest effort in it, it will grow, if you don't it will shrink, and then you will be even more pulled by the desires and your wandering will be even faster and more hectic, more distracted like an animal. And that's why when a rearrangement of this form occurs but your mind was pretty much a mind of an animal, that's the form that you are going to be assuming and that's what the Buddha said, if someone behaves like an animal in this life, that's going to be their destination.

The body is a means of engagement with the world and sense objects, so what you chose to engage with, the way you choose to engage with your body, that's basically where your mind is heading, so next time you might get a body which is more suitable for the level of engagement you want or are choosing. If your mind was engaging with sense objects on the level of animal passion, madness and thirst, then you are going to get a body which is much more suited for that. That's why dogs have a smell much stronger than humans because that's how much

more they are pulled by the sense objects. You might smell something nice but it won't make you lose your mind like a dog. If you don't make the effort and start giving in to losing your mind on account of sense objects, then yes you will get a form which supports what you want, what you keep choosing. If you develop choices which abstain from sense objects then you don't need sense organs, so when the rearrangement happens, so to speak, you will get much fewer sense organs like in the suttas when the Buddha describes the celestial type bodies which are more refined, you would not call them bodies from our point of view.

And again future life, previous life doesn't matter, what matters is to recognize the nature of aimless wandering on and that the aim you might have within that wandering on is fundamentally aimless, so even if you have a great mundane purpose in this life, means it's still mundane and will not change the state of this aimless wandering on, your aim is only relative and when the time comes for thing to rearrange, that aim will make no difference, in other words, you cannot prevent the form from deforming, getting sick and dying that's inconceivable. You are on borrowed time every time.

If you want to have a simplified example of what would correspond to rebirth, it's not about being born again or dying, it's really about losing the memory and that's why beings are bound to constant repetition of the same thing because they have no recognition of what they have already done countless times. After all, if you remembered you would not want to do it anymore, you would want to leave that state of affairs. Imagine now that someone comes and wipes your memory, just the memory so your body is still intact, you are still alive but your memory and recognition of anything you know including yourself is gone. So for you, if you were to wake up from that state, although others would externally see that it's the same person, the same body, but from your point of view, the body and everything would be a new thing, yet it's not a new thing isn't it? It's a new thing from that internal point of view because you have no memory of it and that's exactly what rebirth is. It's just losing the memory and not realizing that the aggregates are not yours and they never were.

Ignorance regarding it has no beginning and that's why you should be concerned about death and dying because everything you learn even the wisdom you got unless it was of a significant kind will most likely not play much part and then all you can do is to focus on doing wholesome things because as I explained simply by cultivating certain habits in the mind, when your memory is wiped clean you are going to start using the body from the point of view of the habits you cultivated beforehand. You don't have explicit memories of the habits but the inclinations are there and those inclinations you are responsible for. They are there because you have been choosing those things many times before. It doesn't just mean that you now just carelessly give in to inclinations, it just means that the presence of inclination is due to previous habits which then also means that you could reshape them.

If your inclinations are bad, you can double down on doing good in this life so that you develop good inclinations. So then in the next manifestation, those inclinations will be what inclines you or directs you without wisdom or memory to recall on. That's really what rebirth in samsara is, the repetition of habits without knowing that you are repeating the same old habits.